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The "Age Proof" House...

Housing Features



by Mary S. Pickett and Mary K. Sullivan

OLDER PEOPLE definitely want to stay in their own homes as long as they possibly can. They enjoy the independence and individuality which they feel in continuing to live in familiar surroundings.

So, if you're planning a home to suit your retirement years or for your parents, then we'd like to give you a look at what older homemakers have told us are needs of those aged 65 and beyond.

There are some things especially important for people their age. Uppermost in their minds are *convenience, comfort* and *safety*—good ideas for people of any age. The room of most concern is the kitchen where they, like other homemakers, spend a good share of their time.

What are their concerns based on? Probably the actual experience of what happens as you grow older. The senses grow duller more than the individual realizes. Eyesight, hearing, smelling, even the sense of touch isn't what it used to be. You're not as agile—you slow down—you don't have the old zip you once had. Even your sense of balance becomes affected.

In a recent survey, we asked 85 homemakers, aged 65 and over, what their preferences were, relating to housing and equipment. Their answers confirmed thoughts we already had—and added some new ideas, too.

Convenience — Comfort

Convenience and comfort pretty much go hand in hand. If your house is built for convenience, then it's certain to be more comfortable to live in. In the survey, the older homemakers indicated they wanted the following:



—A kitchen of minimum size. They didn't want a big kitchen where there would be a lot of walking between the range and the sink and refrigerator to get a meal.

—Adequate counter space. They asked for plenty of "elbow room"—

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no crowded work area in their kitchens. It's easy for counter space to get cluttered with a little bit of everything, leaving no room for mixing and stirring.



—*Adequate storage that's within "easy reach."* Some didn't want wall cabinets—the bottom shelves were easier for them to use. It seems easier for them to stoop than to stretch. As age increases, it's more difficult to maintain equilibrium. When reaching for objects, the body's center of gravity shifts, requiring the person to maintain balance in a new position. This is hard for an older person who does not move quickly, and it often results in falls.

—*Planned storage with a convenient place for everything.* They did not want to expend their energy trying to find a place for things. Nor do they want to hunt endlessly for something they had to stack in the back of a closet because storage was not well planned.

—*Storage that's easy to get into.* They say they want sliding doors on storage areas. Perhaps lack of finger control makes a sliding door easier to operate than complicated door handles or hard-to-open magnetic latches.

—*A kitchen you can eat in.* Again, they want to conserve energy. They are all for some sort of an eating area right in the kitchen—no matter how small.

—*A utility area near the kitchen or bath.* Keep the laundry facilities

on the same floor level as the main living area, they said—not in the basement. And they'd prefer not to have to lug their wash downtown to a self-service laundry either. They also mentioned they'd like a place to hang clothes to drip dry, to store laundry aids, and to fold clean clothes.

It's better to have some separation between the laundry area and the spot where food is being prepared. This keeps the danger of food contamination from soiled clothes at a minimum. So keeping the laundry equipment in an area separated from the kitchen proper is best for health's sake.

—*A small house to conserve their energy.* Though they want a small house, in contrast they want large, open and well-arranged interior spaces. Added to this was a central heating system, indoor plumbing and facilities for having an ample supply of hot water.

Convenience in Care

The amount of work involved in maintaining a home brought about other ideas for conserving energy. To make the job easier, the older homemakers listed these:



—*A one-story house.* Everything they have to do—they want to be able to do it on one floor, and they want no second story windows to clean.

—*Aluminum storm windows and screens.* Aluminum, to them, promised the least amount of care—no corrosion or rust and no need of paint. They showed a preference,

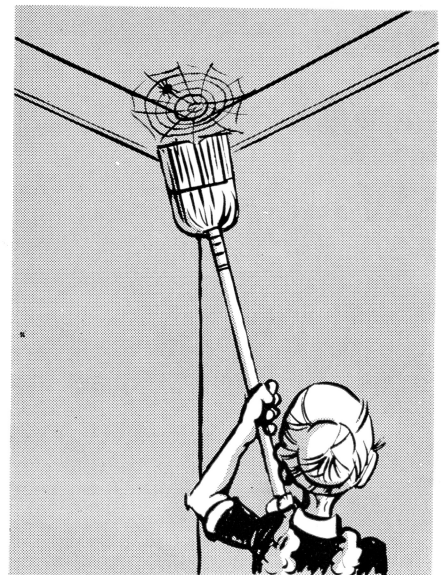
too, for combination units that can be cleaned and replaced from the inside of the house.

—*Brick or aluminum siding.* In choosing either brick or aluminum, they could see the absolute minimum in cost of maintenance. Most of their exterior painting problems would be eliminated.



—*Draperies or curtains instead of venetian blinds.* Draperies, for one thing, gave them less problems in dusting. Another, pulling draperies to open and close them is easy, while the adjustment of venetian blinds can be a puzzle difficult to cope with.

—*Low ceilings.* These women want low ceilings to avoid climbing on ladders and stools. Even on solid footing balance is difficult for an older person to maintain.

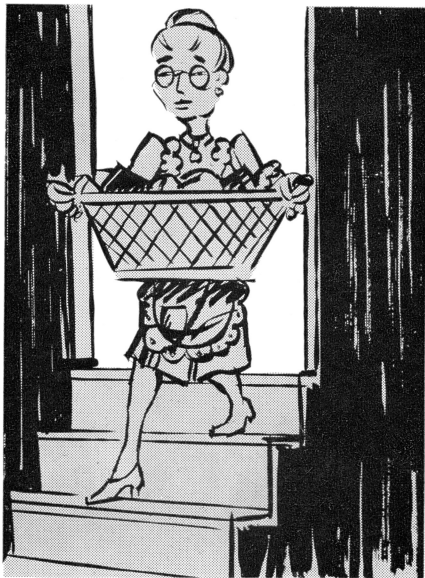


—*Flooring materials easy to care for.* They want smooth floor surfaces, like linoleum or vinyl or other easy care material, in their work areas. Probably the biggest problem they run into here is the concern from slipping from overwaxing. With proper waxing, this need be no problem. Thin coats of wax used more frequently cut down on slippage.

Safety of the House

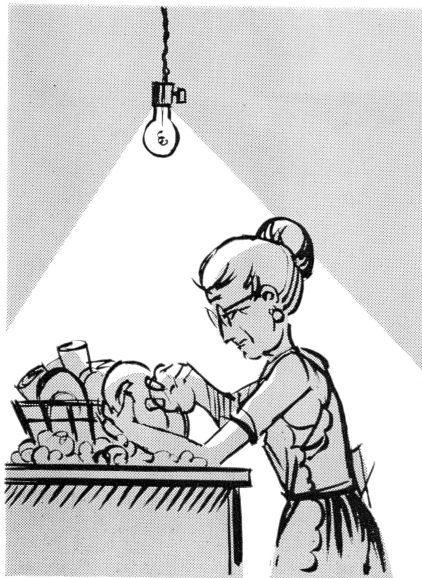
Safety was a big item with older homemakers. Hazards that are just fleeting thoughts to the younger homemaker are reality to the less steady oldster. In viewing safety hazards, they pointed out—

—*Don't have steps.* Have everything on one level, if possible. But if steps are necessary, keep the step up as shallow as you can. The step itself needs to be deep and flat for easy balance. Older people often have to rest in the middle of the stairs and they need to be able to place both feet completely on the step for comfortable support. Overhangs on steps are toe and heel catchers that contribute to falls.



—*Exceptionally good light is needed everywhere.* These homemakers especially want good lighting in the kitchen, laundry, in other work areas, and over steps. As age progresses, our vision changes. In general, after age 40 the eye functions best for distant viewing. So, to bring close-up work into sharper focus, we need the best light possible, without shadows.

Good light is one of the cheapest



insurances against falls you can buy, and should be used in ample supply throughout the home. Often older homemakers sit in a pool of light to read or sew, then try to grope their way out into a dimly lit room. This is when many falls occur, because their eyes cannot adjust from the bright to the dull so quickly.

—*Protect entryways.* Shelters over entryways protect the steps from the weather. It's difficult to be sure-footed on floor surfaces covered with rain, snow or ice. And good lights over entryways offer protection, too. Not only can one see what the entry walking surface is like, but visitors at the door can be seen clearly.

Safety of Utilities

Safety and convenience in the use of house utilities has long been the concern of many homemakers. The older woman indicated these things of importance to her:

—*Not having to learn to use a new kind of fuel.* If she's been used to cooking with gas—or electricity—she's not content to switch. She feels unsure of herself in re-learning a whole new process of use and care.

However, physical limitations of the older person need to be considered in selecting the choice of fuel. Possible reduced sensitivity to odors make it impossible for the older person to detect odors associated with gas leaks.

Preference for fuel to be used in appliances in the home needs careful consideration by all homemakers, especially those who seem to be accident prone or who wear the type of clothing that may easily ignite as they use the appliance. Open flames are dangerous for those who are careless or have grown unsteady.

—*A circuit breaker box rather than a fuse box.* When the lights go out, it's easier to restore electricity with the circuit breaker than to hunt for fuses. It's difficult to see which fuse is burned out and also to read the size for replacement. Also, chances of shock are smaller in re-connecting a circuit breaker than they are in replacing a fuse if standing on a damp floor.



—*Low-pitched and long-ringing doorbells and telephones.* Loss of hearing generally starts with the higher tones. So lower tones can be heard better. And longer rings give the older person a chance to get to the telephone or door without a feeling of having to hurry.

Plan for convenience, comfort and safety. This is what older homemakers say you'll want, too, especially when you reach their age. So prepare for it now. It's the home environment that gives maximum livability for your later years.

Just as you prepare for financial security and best possible physical health, so should you prepare for housing needs appropriate for retirement years. And do it during your working years while you can better afford it.